

Exploring Online Peer Harassment Experiences of Female University Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

In the recent decade, there has been an increase in the use of the internet in Pakistan, and increasingly more female students are using it to communicate with others. However, female students are also facing disproportional harassment via the internet. This study aimed to explore female university students' experiences related to online harassment victimization, bystander behavior, and perpetration. This study was conducted in a private university in Pakistan, and a basic qualitative study research design was used. Semi-structured-interviews were conducted with 14 graduate and postgraduate students to gather the meaning these participants gave or extracted from the online peer harassment experiences. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. All data related to fourteen participants were coded. Clustering similar codes helped in identifying sub-categories from data. Several assertions were developed by comparing and contrasting various categories and sub-categories. Analysis of the data revealed that all the participants had been victims of online harassment. Moreover, all participants had witnessed online harassment as a bystander. However, they did not interfere considering it others' matters, especially when the person causing the problem was unknown to them for fear of harassment. Interestingly, some of them had also been a perpetrator of online harassment. This study has helped in developing an understanding of the prevalence of cyber-bullying and online harassment among female university students using a small sample. The knowledge produced can help us in developing a digital citizenship curriculum, which is a tool to prepare students for using the technology in a positive and informative way so that female university students' online experiences can be made better.

Keywords: Online peer harassment, cyber-bullying, victimization, bystander behavior, perpetration

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Introduction

Information technology has changed the lives of individuals, affording them many benefits and enabling them to complete their daily tasks more efficiently and effectively (Betts, 2016). The use of digital tools has increased not only for entertainment but also for communication, to gather information, access to law, and many more. Considering the internet as a 'safe' space, young people use social networking tools such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp to express themselves freely. All this has effects on ethics, culture, norms, and values, making the lives of individuals more complex.

A current overview uncovered that youth invest more energy on the internet than staring at the TV (Griffiths, 2017). According to one estimate, it was accounted for that young people spend up to 9 hours every day on the web, with most by far of that time being spent via web-based networking media sites from cell phones, adding to the straightforward entry and accessibility to youth. With the expansion of internet and social networking sites (SNS), youth's social activities have moved from the physical world to the cyber-world, and now more and more young individuals are using social networking sites for their social activities (Jones, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2013). The increasing use of cell phones and smartphones for this purpose has expanded internet use to encompass almost the youth's daily social activities.

Many times, we notice people misusing information technology tools. Because of this, cyber-space no more remains a place of positive discourse where social responsibility, caring, and respect can be promoted through a positive, nurturing environment. Online harassment has become a social problem, and "women and minorities are targeted with online harassment more frequently and telling them to leave social media echoes the societal forces that have always tried to silence their voices" (Golbeck, 2018, p. 2).

Peer harassment is also an important social problem negatively affecting a large number of our student population in schools, colleges, and universities. Peer harassment is an umbrella term, and it encompasses various interpersonal aggression, including bullying (Mitchell, Jones, Turner, Shattuck, & Wolak, 2016). Olweus (2001) defined bullying as: "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (pp. 5-6). According to this definition of bullying, negative (aggressive) actions are carried out repeatedly and over time, and secondly, there is a certain imbalance of power or strength (Olweus, 2001). Compared to this, online peer harassment is the one which is committed in the cyber-space, and it is usually in the form of verbal aggression, amounting to threats, rumors, and gossip (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). In addition, Mitchell et al. (2016) are of the view that "peer harassment is a broad term that includes bullying but also includes other types of interpersonal

aggression that do not meet the standard definition of bullying because they do not involve repetition and power imbalances between perpetrators and victims” (p. 193).

Online harassment victimization experiences negatively impacts youth (Mitchell et al., 2016). Baek, Losavio, and Higgins (2016, p. 27) assert that “youth who have experienced online harassment suffer from a variety of negative consequences such as psychological distress and suicidal ideation.” Serious emotional distress, anxiety, damaged reputations, and fear for personal safety social withdrawal and school failure can also occur (Holt, Lee, Liggett, Holt, & Bossler, 2019).

Females are the victim of technology violence and are experiencing online harassment victimization because nowadays greater numbers of individuals are accessing the internet. Ostini and Hopkins (2015) believe that our understanding of violence is limited to traditional and corporeal perspectives perceiving violence as a physical threat. They assert that there is a need for broadening our perspective on violence by incorporating technology violence. They define technology violence as “the extent to which new communication and surveillance intimate partners, technologies are increasingly misused to stalk, intimidate, harass, humiliate and coerce particularly girls and women” (Ostini & Hopkins, 2015, p. 4). Since university students are becoming more reliant upon computers, they are facing increasing number of encounters—which can be characterized as online harassment victimization, stalking, and sexual assault. The prevalence of technology violence and online harassment victimization in the Pakistani context is yet to be determined since there exist no substantial amount of studies to support the premise.

Another phenomenon, which is often linked with online harassment and has a distinct role in the dynamic of bullying, is ‘Bystander.’ The traditional conceptualization of bullying sees this phenomenon as a dyadic interaction between a *bully* and a *victim*. However, recently, third party, the bystander, has been incorporated to study potential of bystanders to affect the bullying dynamic (Quirk & Campbell, 2015). This was certainly to explain social context (the presence of others) in which most bullying takes place. Quirk and Campbell (2015, p. 431) elaborate that “regardless of how they behave, bystanders are the social consensus: that is, how they choose to act will sustain the social norm.” This is so because “bystanders provide direct feedback of the acceptability of behaviour by reacting in a certain way; a bystander can choose to actively or passively reinforce the aggressive behaviour, or s/he can choose to support the victim” (p. 431).

Engagement in responsive bystander behavior is believed to be positively influenced by several factors. Greater self-efficacy and feeling responsible for acting appear to increase the probability of bystander behavior. Furthermore, personal or social factors also play significant role in an individual’s decision to act in the role of a responsive bystander behavior. Yule and Grych (2017) assert that “individuals are more

likely to intervene in a risky situation if they have a relationship with the victim or perpetrator, are younger, female, have a history of victimization and report peer norms that are unsupportive of sexual coercion” (p. 3).

Nevertheless, engaging in a bystander behaviour is hindered by several factors, which inhibit observers from intervening in a bullying situation. The risk of being tangled in a potentially dangerous interaction may hinder some not to involve in bystander behaviour. Moreover, the ambiguous nature of potentially risky situations also influences the decision of many. Moreover, if students are seeking acceptance and friendships in their new context, they usually less inclined to act as bystander (Yule & Grych, 2017).

Online bystander behaviour can be exhibited in various ways. Victims of online harassment experience often have the option to report the content and harassers to the social networking platform where the harassment has occurred. This harassment report is then evaluated by the officials of the platforms “against terms of use and other policies to decide whether to remove content or take action against the alleged harasser—or not” (Matias et al., 2015, p. iv). In this study, an individual was considered to exhibit bystander behavior if “she has told the person causing the problem to stop, talked to harasser’s friends to help it stop, got friends to try and help, reported the problem to website, talked to an adult at home and/ or talked to an adult at university about harassment experience online” (Jones & Mitchell, 2016).

There is only very limited research on the topic of cyber-bullying and online harassment in the Pakistani context (eg., Batool, 2017; Butt, Jamil, & Khalid, 2019; Hafeez, 2014; Hafsa & Hanif, 2017; Rafi, 2019; Shahid, Kausar, & Zulqarnain, 2018). In addition, Mitchell et al. (2016) have underscored that “technology-based harassment and bullying could cause greater harm than traditional forms because content can be transmitted anonymously, involve many other youths quickly, and reach victims anywhere and at any time” (p. 193). As universities are increasingly emphasizing the need for developing a policy response to cyber-bullying and online harassment, policy-makers must understand contextual ground realities so that effective policy could be developed. This study was designed to fill this gap.

Research Methods

This study aims to explore female university students’ experiences related to online harassment. This study focuses on three key dimensions: online harassment victimization, bystander behavior, and online harassment perpetration. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of female university students regarding online harassment victimization?

2. What are the perceptions and experiences of female university students regarding online bystander behavior?
3. What are the perceptions and experiences of female university students regarding online harassment perpetration?

In this study, a qualitative research approach was used. Qualitative research is one of the ways of learning about social reality and is an effective way to explore the meanings people ascribe to activities (Mason, 2018; Patton, 2015). This study used what Merriam (2009) calls a *basic qualitative study research design*, which is used to explore “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose was “to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23).

Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted to gather the meaning female university students gave or extracted from the experiences they had lived (Brinkmann, 2013). Good perspectives are directly related to the experience participants have (Leavy, 2014). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from students.

Several resources such as some literature reviews, interview guides made by some other researchers, journals, and research scholars were consulted for the construction of appropriate and to-the-point questions. However, Jones and Mitchell’s (2016) well-formulated questions for the investigation of online harassment victimization, bystander behavior, and online harassment perpetration were useful in the construction of the final draft of the interview guide. Research participants also provided help in the preparation of the interview guide. Research participants were given as the role of help providers throughout the preparation of the interview guide. Therefore, they knew the various dimensions of the interview guide before the interview was conducted.

Sampling and Criteria for Inclusion of Participants

Criterion sampling (Patton, 2015) was used to select a sample for this study. Since the study was delimited to the female students of the Education Department of a private university in Lahore, all cases that met the following predetermined criteria were selected: Participant studied in the particular private university in Lahore, had completed her one-year education in the Education Department, was easily approachable and had herself agreed to participate in the interview process. The demographic information of participants is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Age	Program	Semester
1	24	MPhil Education	3
2	24	MPhil Education	3
3	28	PhD Education	1
4	25	MPhil Education	1
5	24	MPhil Education	4
6	25	MPhil Education	4
7	25	MPhil Education	4
8	23	BS Education	6
9	23	BS Education	6
10	25	PhD Education	1
11	26	PhD Education	1
12	24	MPhil Education	3
13	25	MPhil Education	3
14	23	BS Education	6

Participants were asked whether they had faced some disrespectful online behavior during the past three months. On a positive reply, they were selected as participants to conduct the interviews with them. Their ages ranged from twenty-three to twenty-eight. All the female participants were selected because they face more harassment issues on the internet. This was also to narrow down the study only to female students.

Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014; Flick, 2014; Schreier, 2012). All in-depth interviews with female university students were tape-recorded, translated, and transcribed later. Face-to-face interviews were conducted and recorded accordingly. Recordings were used to transcribe those interviews. The transcription was verbatim. Transcription was checked by an expert in the English language after completion. Some transcripts were also shown back to participants of this research to validate the accuracy of the accounts (Creswell, 2007).

After that, a summary of participants' responses concerning each dimension was written. Coding was developed from this summary (Saldaña, 2013), and all data related to fourteen participants were coded. Clustering similar codes helped in identifying categories and sub-categories from data. Several assertions were developed by comparing and contrasting various categories and sub-categories (Miles, Huberman

& Saldaña, 2014). These assertions in the form of themes are reported in the next section.

Results

Online Harassment Victimization

Most of the participants reported that they faced online rude and mean comments. According to them, people mostly used bad language online while talking with others. This happened mostly on Facebook and WhatsApp, where people made rude and mean comments. People mostly made rude and mean comments with the unknown. They used very bad language; even they did this publicly, and people did not care about others' feelings. They did not tolerate anything and used harsh language with others. In the past few days, there was a political campaign going on in Pakistan, and youth took a keen interest in political posts on social media. In supporting their parties, some participants had long conversations, which mostly resulted in an exchange of rude and mean comments. Statuses on Facebook and WhatsApp concerning their activities in different parties also resulted in an exchange of rude and mean comments from known and unknown people.

I am very interested in politics. Recently, when the political talk was the top trend, I also took part in different online conversations to support my political party. At that time, I faced many rude comments. (Participant 8)

However, sometimes, some known people also made rude comments on their posts and profile photos, and they did this just for fun.

Most of the participants perceived that people did not even hesitate to make rude behavior online, even with known and unknown persons. People forget their norms and values while using technology. They are better at writing bad or rude comments to other than face-to-face word firing. While commenting on other posts, people did not think that what they are saying, will it hurt them or not? Online behaviors of people are different from good digital citizenship. They did not show good digital citizenship behaviors. In making rude behavior, both genders are included in it. Some faced them on Facebook by commenting on others' posts. They use such a bad language that they show that they are uneducated and have no manners.

Most of the participants reported that they faced online harassment. People harassed them by using different ways and applications like some faced this problem on Facebook. For example, some unknown person tried to contact them by sending them friend requests if they did not accept the request, they texted them on the messenger and tried to blackmail them with different ways, even they called them on the messenger to disturb them. Some participants reported that they faced harassment on WhatsApp. Some unknown people texted them and tried to talk with them, even called them on

WhatsApp, and if they did not reply, the harasser started bad language that disturbed the victim.

All the victims blocked perpetrators on Facebook and WhatsApp or any other online applications, from where they faced such problems. They believed that blocking was the best way to get rid of this, making the victim comfortable and relaxed. They only asked perpetrators if they were acquaintance; all unknown persons were blocked by them directly. Most participants experienced online harassment through friendship requests and texts by others. A participant said, "If someone's personality is strong, then no one can harass or embarrass others. Anyone should keep her personality strong" (Participant 9). Another participant reported,

Obviously, when someone makes rude comments to you, then you cannot bear it. On many of my posts, when someone commented rudely, I also gave an answer. Sometimes, my friends commented on my post: You are looking fat, etc. Then I always answered them. It is unbearable for me. (Participant 4)

Some of the participants experienced the issue of people spreading rumors about them. They had experienced different situations. Some victims had experienced severe conditions regarding this. Some did just for fun and enjoyment. A few said that they did not experience this issue on the internet. They did not face such a problem in their life that anyone could spread rumors about him. They reported that they had many people who might be jealous of them, but no one took this step to vilify them.

However, most of the participants faced the issue that someone shared their personal information and made them feel too much embarrassed, and after that, they were unable to have trust in others. All of them were victimized by their good friends and family members. Some said that their close friends shared their personal information because a person can share their personal information only with their close people on whom they had trusted, but they break their trust and tell their personal information to others. They reported that people, even close friends, shared their personal things with others on social media by posting it on different applications.

Most of the participants experienced that their pictures and videos on social media were shared by friends without their consent. Some said that their friends posted their photos just for fun, but sometimes it hurt a lot, as they did not want them to share such photos on media. Some photos were taken in parties and other events. Posting their bad photos hurt them a lot because other friends made fun of it online and publically. One respondent said that her friend posted her photo in her WhatsApp status, she asked her to remove it because people started making fun of her, but her friend did not do so, so it resulted in a dispute.

The summary of findings related to dimensions of online harassment victimization explored in this study is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Findings related to Dimensions of Online Harassment Victimization

Dimensions of Online Harassment Victimization Explored.	Findings
Experiencing rude or mean comments.	All participants faced online, rude, and mean comments.
Experiencing harassment or embarrassment the internet you.	All participants had experienced online harassment.
Experiencing spread of rumors about you on the internet.	Some participants experienced people spread rumors about them on the internet.
Experiencing the sharing of something personal online with others about you.	Most of the participants faced the issue that someone shared their personal information that made them too embarrassed, and after this, they were unable to have trust in others. All of them were victimized by their good friends and family members.
Experiencing posting of a video or picture of you that you knew it would hurt your feeling.	Most of the participants experienced that their pictures and videos on social media were shared by friends without their consent.

Online Bystander Behavior

All participants reported that they witnessed online harassment. Some reported that harassment was public since both the members were threatening each other badly, and no one was there to stop them. If anyone did so, he or she had to face his or her bad comments as well. Therefore, most participants did not interfere.

Yes, I have seen online harassment many times. People use harsh words with others. They forget their norms and values on social media. People are harassing each other in public places, but no one-stop them from this act. (Participant 13)

However, some tried to stop them and tried to settle the issue. They reported that it was a common routine for them to see the people harassing and teasing others.

When participants were asked about stopping the person causing a problem on social media, they reported that they did not interfere in others' matters, especially the person causing problems unknown to them, so they did not even bother to stop them. However, if he or she was known to them, they always tried to stop such activity on

social media. They said that when they tried to stop them, they started harassing them. Some tried to solve their problems and issues personally.

Most of the participants said that they did not talk to the harasser's friend because both of them are unknown to them. They said that the best way was to get rid of all such activities on social media because this was very common almost on every post that negative people would comment badly and try to threaten others.

Most of the participants replied that they did not try to involve their friends in any social media issue believing that this was their problem; they did not involve others. The person creating the problem was mostly unknown to them, so they did not involve them and their friends in other's problems. However, if someone known was in trouble on social media, they themselves and their friends also tried to help them and resolved their problems.

Almost all the participants mentioned that they reported different pages and websites that they did not like, or they thought those websites and pages on social media seemed to destroy the norms and values of society. Some highlighted that they reported pages and IDs because their friends told them to do so.

Most of the participants believed that social media and their problems were their personal matters, so they did not involve their family members in social media matters. Most of the participants did not tell their social media matters to their family. They themselves resolved their problems. Some of them reported that they did not face any such a big issue that needed their family's involvement. They believed that they used the internet only for entertainment. They did not do such bad activities that created problems for them. However, a participant told her family about her online experience that included a person harassing her and trying to trap her, so she told her mother to resolve such an issue. One participant involved her sister in her matter on social media because she believed that elders were more experienced and could give better advice.

The summary of findings related to dimensions of online bystander behavior explored in this study is provided in Table 3.

Table 3
Findings related to Dimensions of Online Bystander Behavior

Dimensions of Online Bystander Behavior Explored.	Findings
Witnessing online harassment.	All participants had witnessed online harassment.
Stopping the person causing the harassment problem.	They did not interfere in others' matters, especially when the person causing a problem was unknown to them for fear of harassment.
Talking to the harasser's friend to help it stop.	They did not talk to the harasser's friend because both of them are unknown to them. They just log off all such activities on social media.
Getting friends to help to deal with the harassment problem.	Most of the participants replied that they did not try to involve their friends in any social media issue.
Reporting the harassment problem to website.	Almost all the participants said that they reported different pages and websites that they did not like, or they thought those websites and pages on social media that seems out of our culture and try to destroy our norms and values.
Talking to an adult at home about the SNS harassment problem.	Most of the participants believed that social media and their problems are their personal matters, so they did not involve their family members in social media matters.

Online Harassment Perpetration

Analysis of the responses revealed that most of the participants made rude and mean comments to others. All of them said that this was the result of their reaction to the rude comments of others. Mostly they did not read comments on posts, and they only enjoyed the post and ignored all other activities. Some of the participants reported that after seeing wrong comments, they could not tolerate, and they reacted on it, and such activities mostly happened on Facebook and in different groups. One respondent told the story that she was a pet lover, and she joined different groups and pages related to pets. A person on that group said,

No one should rescue a dog because it is prohibited in Islam. At this, I replied to him that to rescue any animal is not prohibited in Islam. That resulted in dispute, and no one was there to control it. (Participant 12)

All participants made mean and rude comments to unknown people because they did not have to face them in their lives. However, with known people, they mostly avoided such activities. Political talks were on the top trend since it was an election season, so many respondents took an interest in the political debate, so mostly started using harsh and rude words to support their party.

Next, the participants were asked about online harassment activity done by participants. Some of the participants used the internet to harass or embarrass someone. One of them said that she wanted to teach a lesson to a boy that used to harass other girls. Her purpose was not to harm others, not to embarrass someone, but she used social media to teach a lesson to someone. She used the internet in different ways to know about him and kept an eye on his activities. Another participant reported,

Yes, once I used the internet to harass someone. That was my class fellow; he always followed me in the university, and I was very disturbed by his act. I told this to my friend, and she gave me an idea to make a fake ID to stop it. I made an ID with a male name and warned him not to disturb that girl in the university. After this, he stopped following me. (Participant 13)

Some participants said online harassment was beyond their thoughts. They themselves had faced this many times, but they did not think to do this ever in their life because they did not want to hurt anyone. Some respondents said that they were busy in their studies; they did not have much time for such activities. They believed that we all should use technology for a good purpose. For some participants, this question seemed very weird. At first, they ignored this question and said nothing in their online life that can be characterized harassment. Few participants shared their activities of spreading rumors about someone through the internet. A participant reported,

Yes, once I did this but not to harm my friend but just for fun. As I told you that, my friends make fun of me regarding my engagement and spread rumors. Just to take a revenge about this, I spread a rumor about my friend that she loves a boy in our university... but after some days, I accepted that this was only a joke, nothing else. (Participant 10)

Some of the participants reported that they shared something personal about others. For example, a participant stated,

Once I came to know about the second marriage of our professor through our class fellow. He did not want this to be known to any of the students. But I told this to my friends via Facebook that our professor has a second marriage. I think this was his private matter, and if he came to know, it would hurt him. (Participant 14)

All the participants stated that they shared pictures of their friends just for fun or for some other purposes but not for harming anyone. To wish them birthdays on Facebook, they posted their pictures and wished them good. None of them stated that they used others' pictures to harm others. Some posted pictures on WhatsApp status or Instagram, just to show love and friendship, nothing else. All of them said that they shared other's pictures just for fun, but sometimes it might have hurt others. They

mostly shared their pictures of friends and family in privacy. If they post others' pictures, most of them reported that they always asked them for permission to post. Some said that they posted funny pictures of their friends, just to tease them.

Most of the participants took part in online groups and different conversation pages. For example, a participant wanted to ask some questions related to online CSS groups. She joined CSS groups, and she asked different questions in online groups and on different education pages. There were MCQs on those pages and groups, so they always took part and answered them. Sometimes they directly asked questions in online groups, and if someone knew that answer, he or she directly responded to her.

Many times, I took and gave information to different groups. Recently, we had many talks on politics, and I participated in them. Sometimes it resulted in disputes and sometimes ended just as fun. (Participant 4)

A few participants reported that they used social media, just for time pass nothing else, and they did not take part in any conversation even they did view the comments. They just read the posts and then scrolled down. The summary of findings related to dimensions of online harassment victimization explored in this study is provided in Table 4:

Table 4
Findings related to Dimensions of Online Harassment Perpetration

Dimensions of Online Harassment Perpetration Explored	Findings
Making rude or mean comments to someone.	All participants made mean and rude comments to unknown people because they did not have to face them in their lives. However, with known people, they mostly avoided such activities.
Using the internet to harass or embarrass someone.	Some of the participants used the internet to harass or embarrass someone.
Spreading rumors about someone using the internet.	Few participants spread rumors about someone using the internet.
Sharing something personal online with others about someone.	Some of the participants shared something personal about others.
Posting or sharing a video or pictures of someone online when he knew it might hurt or upset them.	All the participants shared pictures of their friends just for fun or some other activities, mostly privately.

Conclusion

This exploration of female university students' experiences related to online harassment victimization, perpetration, and bystander behavior through qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with 14 graduate and

postgraduate students from a private university in Pakistan revealed some interesting findings. Most participants faced online rude and mean comments and had experience of people spreading rumors about them on the internet, sharing their personal information, pictures, and videos on social media without their consent to the extent that they were now unable to have trust in others. All participants had witnessed online harassment. However, they did not interfere in others' matters, especially when the person was unknown to them for fear of harassment. They just logged off on social media. However, they did report different pages and websites that they did not like, or they thought immoral websites and pages on social media.

On the other hand, the same participants admitted that they made mean and rude comments to unknown people because they did not have to face them in their lives. However, with known people, they mostly avoided such activities. Even some participants used the internet to harass or embarrass others on the internet, spread rumors about someone using the internet, and shared personal information of others. This was done for fun.

This study has helped in developing an in-depth understanding of the prevalence of cyber-bullying and online harassment using a small sample recruited from a private university in Pakistan. There is a need for resource development and training to improve the views of female university students regarding online harassment and bullying behaviors. Digital citizenship education can be made part of university curricula so that students could be educated about the use of technology and appropriate behavior online so that students should be taught to use the technology only for the right purpose. Besides, they may be guided to develop online respectful civic behavior and effective bystander behavior.

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